

What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus?

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### **Abstract**

Central Elementary faculty and staff participated in a survey to address our campus needs for improving Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The results of the survey revealed that many participants did not feel supported in their classroom and many participants did not find value in our current PLCs. For six months, our campus participated in an Action Inquiry to answer the question: What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus? In order to implement and evaluate this Action Inquiry, we used tools and improvement sustainment methods outlined in *Examining what we do to improve our schools: 8 steps to improve our schools* (Harris 2010, pp.94-99).

Keywords: action, campus, collaboration, improvement, inquiry, professional learning communities, PLCs

What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus?

According to results from a survey, many Central Elementary staff members did not feel supported in their classroom and many participants did not find value in our current PLCs. Many participants felt strategies discussed during PLCs were not modeled to an extent at which they felt comfortable using in their own classroom. Participants also stated they lacked in class support to implement strategies discussed during PLCs, therefore devaluing the PLC learning opportunities.

Our goal was to find ways to make our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) more relevant and effective. We wanted all members to actively share, participate, and lead PLCs. We also wanted our campus to have the shared vision that effective PLCs will increase student achievement and allow educators to grow professionally. The goal of our PLCs is to enhance our effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit.

Rosenholtz (1989) addressed how teachers' workplace factors affected the teaching quality. Rosenholtz noted that teachers who felt supported in their own lifelong learning and classroom practice were more devoted and effective than those who did not receive such affirmation. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, suggesting that when teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry they were able to develop and share acuity garnered from their experience. Dana (2009) further emphasizes how PLCs enhance the possibilities for conducting action inquiry and cultivates a community of action inquirers. The "action" in "action inquiry" produces participation, ownership, and results.

Dana focuses on four critical tasks that an action inquirer must perform while sharing the action research plan (Dana, 2009, p. 163). The first step is providing background knowledge. Background knowledge allows others to understand your purpose or reason for the action inquiry. The second step is to share the “design” of your inquiry. Sharing the “design” allows others to understand the procedures and data used for the inquiry. The first two steps open the door for the third step of supporting your statements. The implementation of these four critical tasks allows others to learn from your research and formulate their own action inquiries. Their action inquiries will prompt further research, thus continuing the collaboration amongst peers. This cycle allows us to be continuous life-long learners and action inquirers.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Our campus is a 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade campus with approximately 550 students. Our action inquiry included a group of campus staff members. We had 21 out of 38 staff members actively participate in the action inquiry. The participants included male and female Latinos, Caucasians, and African Americans. The participants' age range was 23-72 years old. The participants had a wide range of teaching experience and years in the education profession. The participants' years of teaching experience ranged from 1-32 years. The participants' years on our campus ranged from 1-23 years. The participants also had a wide range of grade level and content area experience. The grade level experience ranged from PK-12.

Our Action Inquiry did not directly involve students or community members. Although some staff members actually live in our local community, we did not directly involve anyone that was not a member of the Central Elementary staff.

### **Setting**

The action inquiry activities and procedures took place during Content Area Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at Central Elementary. Our PLCs were held bi-monthly after school. Participants met from 3:15 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. in their content leader's room. The content areas were math, reading, science, and social studies. The action inquiry activities and strategies were then extended into some of the classrooms on our campus. Some of the classrooms benefited from our Action Inquiry, because their teacher chose to remain actively involved in the Action Inquiry.

## Procedures

We began our action inquiry by organizing roles, responsibilities, materials, and timelines for implementation of the activities outline in our inquiry. In organizing and managing our inquiry, we used tools and improvement sustainment methods outlined in *Examining what we do to improve our schools: 8 steps to improve our schools* (Harris 2010, pp.94-99). As shown in Table 1, we developed an Action Inquiry Plan for improving PLCs on our campus.

**Table 1**

Improving PLCs: Our Action Inquiry Plan

<b>Action Inquiry:</b> What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus?
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<p><b>Goal:</b> Our goal is to find ways to make our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) more relevant and effective. We want all members to actively share, participate, and lead PLCs. We also want our campus to have the shared vision that effective PLCs will increase student achievement and allow educators to grow professionally. The goal of our PLCs is to enhance our effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit. <b>Action Inquiry:</b> What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus?</p>
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<p><b>Rationale:</b> Rosenholtz (1989) addressed how teachers' workplace factors affected the teaching quality. Rosenholtz noted that teachers who felt supported in their own lifelong learning and classroom practice were more devoted and effective than those who did not receive such affirmation. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, suggesting that when teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry they were able to develop and share acuity garnered from their experience. Dana (2009) further emphasizes how PLCs enhance the possibilities for conducting action inquiry and cultivates a community of action inquirers. The “action” in “action inquiry” produces participation, ownership, and results.</p> <p>In order to implement and evaluate this Action Inquiry, we will use tools and improvement sustainment methods outlined in <i>Examining what we do to improve our schools: 8 steps to improve our schools</i> (Harris 2010, pp.94-99).</p>
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Action Steps(s):	Person(s) Responsible:	Timeline: Start/End	Needed Resources	Evaluation
Analyze the impact of our current PLCs to discover what is effective and ineffective. Allow teachers to engage in self-reflection regarding their contributions to PLCs and ways to make PLCS more relevant and effective to them.	Participants: Faculty & Staff  Facilitator: Amy Zbylut & Daniel Salinas	November 30, 2010 – December 3, 2010	Survey Monkey Computer & Access to the Internet Faculty & Staff (stakeholder participants)	Results from the survey will be used to initiate our action inquiry on “What can we do to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus?”

Establish routines for collective inquiry that enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness	Amy Zbylut  CILT Members  PLC Members  (Exclude administration, so educators can feel real ownership of the established routines)	December 6, 2010 – January 6, 2011	Paper Pencils Educator Voices: (In order to share and collaborate on relevant and effective routines and schedules for leading, presenting, & sharing at PLCs) Computer (To type final copy of routines and schedules) Email: (To disseminate final copy of routines and schedules)	Rough Drafts that were created through PLCs will be used to create final copies of routines and schedules. Each PLC Math, Science, Reading, Language Arts, & Social Studies may create their own or decide to use one for all content areas.
Create PLC Norms based on what an effective PLC should look like or the mannerism in which it should operate	Content Area PLC Chairperson	December 6, 2010 – January 6, 2011	Paper Pencils Educator Voices (In order to share and collaborate on relevant and effective PLC Norms to follow during PLCs) Computer (To type final copy of PLC Norms) Email: (To disseminate final copy of PLC Norms)	PLC Norms will be followed and evaluated at future PLCs.
Incorporate research based articles, videos, & book studies that allow our campus to implement what was learned Topics Include:	Content Area PLC Chairperson  Daniel Salinas Loretta Darden  Amy Zbylut (Provide the	December 2010 – April 2011	Research Based Articles Internet Paper Books Videos Money (Staff Development-Line Code)	Collaboration and discussion on research based articles, videos, and book studies. Applying what was learned to our classrooms and campus.



*Effective PLCs and their correlation to Student Achievement *Engaging students *Integrating Technology (Provide the skills or job-embedded professional development to allow teachers to implement technology)	skills or job-embedded professional development to allow teachers to implement technology)			Discussing the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of what was applied from previous studies/PLCs.
Use the Nominal Group Technique to analyze the impact of our changes to the PLCs to discover what was effective and ineffective. Identify concerns and routines that should be sustained for future PLCs. Address changes that should be in place for future PLCs.	Participants: Faculty & Staff  Facilitators: Amy Zbylut & Daniel Salinas	May 2011	Nominal Group Technique tool  Meeting Place for all staff members  Faculty & Staff (stakeholder participants)	The results from the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) activity will allow us to maintain the positive aspects of our action inquiry on PLCs and to initiate further action inquiry on “What other measures can we take to make PLCs more beneficial to educators and students?”

**Format based on Tool 7.1 from *Examining What We Do to Improve Our Schools***

**(Harris, Edmonson, and Combs, 2010)**

After developing our plan, we orally presented the plan and disseminated hard and soft copies of the plan. This allowed participants to have a guide and timeline for implementation of actions outlined in Table 1. It also allowed the participants to focus on our goal for making PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus.

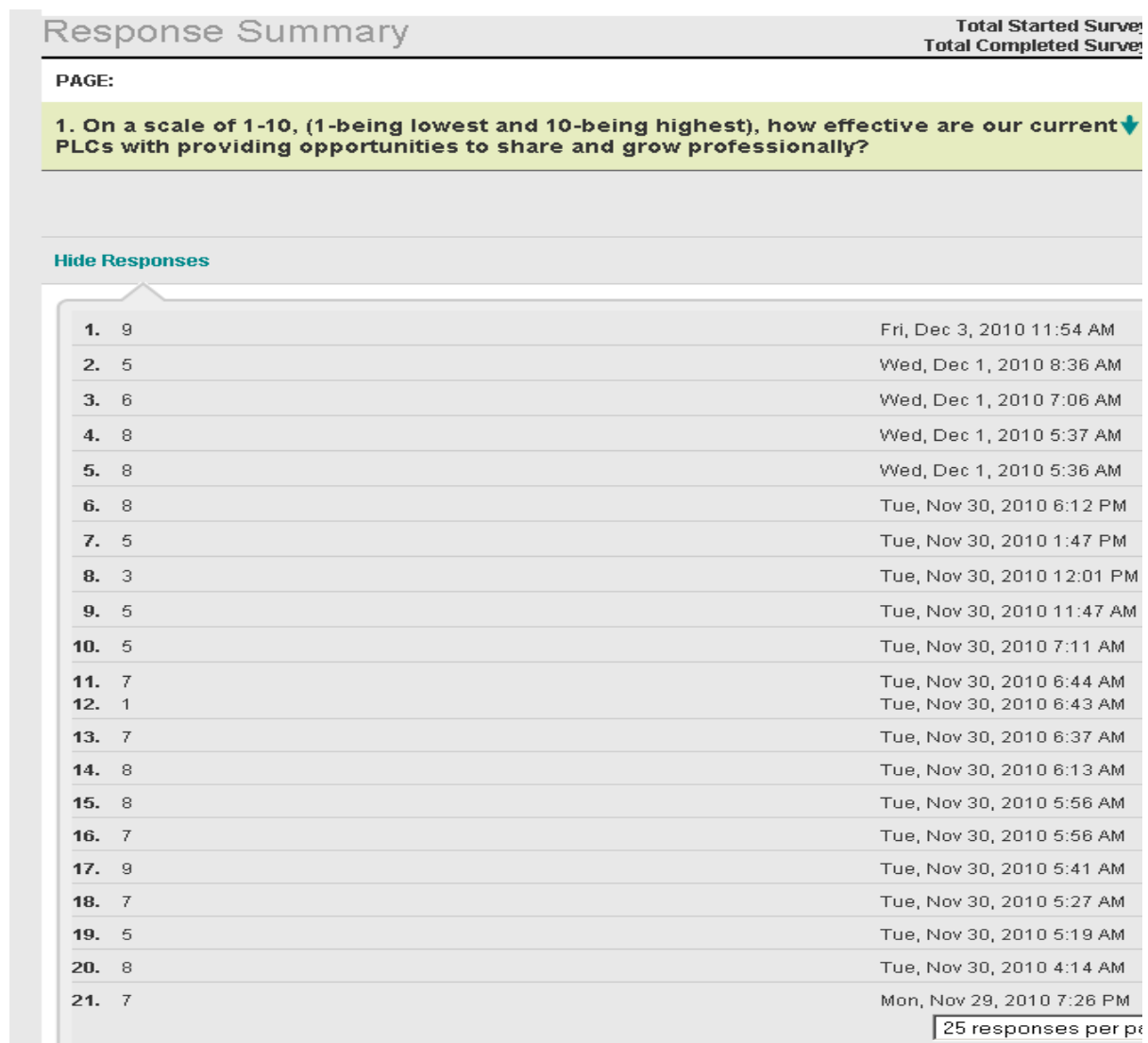
After disseminating the Action Inquiry Plan, our participants worked collaboratively to complete each of the activities outlined in Table 1. In completing each activity, we used the diversity of the participants to implement strategies that would serve the needs of students with special/exceptional needs and students with diverse backgrounds (cultural, ethnic, economic, and/or special interest groups). After the completion of each activity outlined in Table 1, we would reflect on our success and areas that still needed improvement. These reflections would occur formally in Grade Level, Faculty, and PLC meetings. The reflections also occurred informally through email, phone, text messages, and face-to-face conversations.

## Results

Our participants had the opportunity to participate in an online survey from [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) during the beginning stages of our Action Inquiry. The results of the survey allowed the participants to understand our reason for the need to make PLCs more relevant and effective on our campus. As shown in Figures 1-5, the results of the survey showed a need for PLC improvement, staff motivation, and climate change on our campus.

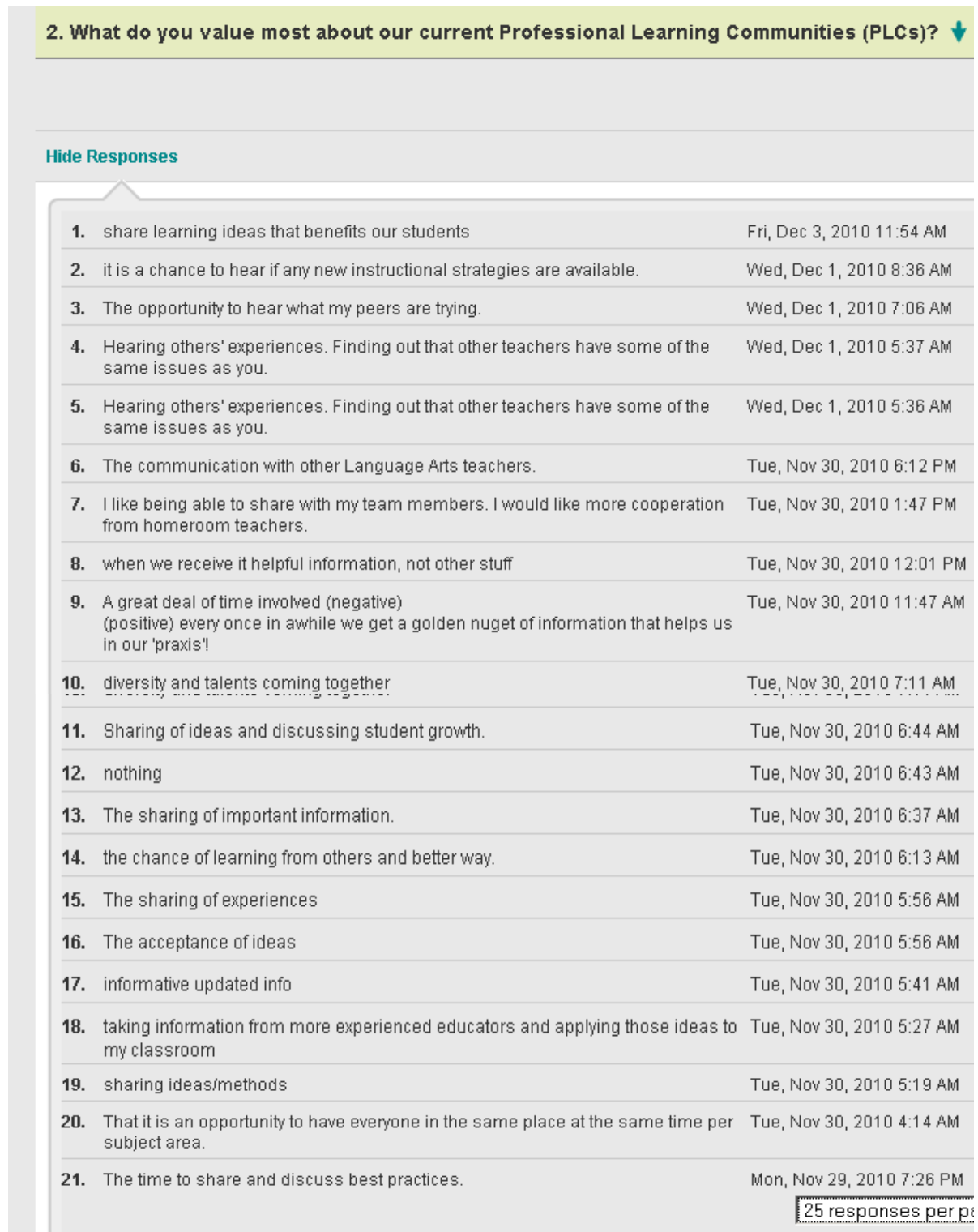
**Figure 1**

Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 1



**Figure 2**

Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 2



**Figure 3**

Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 3

3. What are some changes you would like to see in regards to our current PLCs?	
<a href="#">Hide Responses</a>	
1. none	Fri, Dec 3, 2010 11:54 AM
2. do away with them	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 8:36 AM
3. Everyone participating....not just a few!	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 7:06 AM
4. n/a	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:37 AM
5. n/a	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:36 AM
6. No changes	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:12 PM
7. We meet as 'special' teachers and I like that.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 1:47 PM
8. Everyone must attend including those tutoring or at least let the ones that are not in a group cover so they can come.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 12:01 PM
9. More vertical planning!	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 11:47 AM
10. more instruction based instead of philosophy	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 7:11 AM
11. Everyone bringing something to share to the table. What is working? What is not working? We need to take our student data- dissect it down to TEKS and rethink the way we are teaching it. What is working for others?	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:44 AM
12. stop having them	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:43 AM
13. More participation from all teachers and better development of leaders.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:37 AM
14. nothing	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:13 AM
15. More meetings.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM
16. Frequency	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM
17. none @ this time	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:41 AM
18. none	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:27 AM
19. more time to share and less directives from the leader	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:19 AM
20. I would like to see the responsibilities rotate without feeling you are forcing someone to have input.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 4:14 AM
21. I would like more people to share at and attend the PLCs. I would also like students to have the opportunity to discuss what they thought was one of their teacher's "best practices". For example, a student might have learned a lot from an experiment or video.	Mon, Nov 29, 2010 7:26 PM

**Figure 4**

## Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 4

4. Name the Professional Learning course or class which had the greatest impact on you. <a href="#">Download Why? (If you do not remember the specific name of the course, please share the topic/concept discussed during the course.)</a>			Response Count
<a href="#">Hide Responses</a>			21
1. problem solving skills because they are weak in this skills	Fri, Dec 3, 2010 11:54 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
2. learned about the CUBE problem solving strategy.	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 8:36 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
3. Reading--some websites that were demonstrated that game learning activities for reading skills...ex.(cause/effect) (inferencing) ( summarization), etc.	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 7:06 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
4. Autism Academy & the last SELC Special Ed training	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:37 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
5. Autism Academy & the last SELC Special Ed training	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:36 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
6. No great impact	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:12 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
7. We have not had a specific class.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 1:47 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
8. would rather not	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 12:01 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
9. "IFL - Pittsburgh" Agenda or "Region 10 STARR Preparation for the Math and Science"	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 11:47 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
10. all nasa courses	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 7:11 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
11. PLC Conference	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:44 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
12. none	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:43 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
13. PLC's at Work Conference in New Orleans, La. It detailed various PLC strategies and gave valuable ideas for making PLCs more effective.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:37 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
14. sicence	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:13 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
15. The one regarding learning disabilities	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
16. The course in which we talked about assessing our students each step of the way to make sure we find where they get lost	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
17. Mathematics Academy	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:41 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
18. math, because that is the focus of what i teach	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:27 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
19. i don't know	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:19 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
20. The Science class where the team took apart the CPG and made labs/lesson plans for the entire six weeks.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 4:14 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	
21. The annual 21st Century Technology Conference provided by Region 10, because I have learned how to use many "free" technologies that engage students. Using the resources from this conference has made my classroom more fun, engaging, and more manageable.	Mon, Nov 29, 2010 7:26 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>	

**Figure 5**

## Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 5

5. Regarding the previous question, have you used any of the skills/techniques learned from that class? If yes, please provide a brief description of the skill/technique. If no, please provide a brief description of the skill/technique you plan on using from that class.			Download
			Response Count
<a href="#">Hide Responses</a>			21
1.	problem solving skills students will create their own story problems to help improve this skills	Fri, Dec 3, 2010 11:54 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
2.	CUBE problem solving strategy	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 8:36 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
3.	I am waiting for (hub/hubs) to connect my computer work stations to the internet....then I will be using them as practice and enrichment activities.	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 7:06 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
4.	Yes for the Autism Academy: I was able to share some information with colleagues who were servicing students with autism. I also shared the updated information with my fellow special ed teachers from the SELC SpEd meeting, and I plan on making the changes I need to make to get things updated with my caseload.	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:37 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
5.	Yes for the Autism Academy: I was able to share some information with colleagues who were servicing students with autism. I also shared the updated information with my fellow special ed teachers from the SELC SpEd meeting, and I plan on making the changes I need to make to get things updated with my caseload.	Wed, Dec 1, 2010 5:36 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
6.	I didn't see anything of great importance in changing of my skills/technique	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:12 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
7.	No specific classes. We work together to have the best for our students that we can	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 1:47 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
8.	no, have already been using the skills	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 12:01 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
9.	Yes, "Math Anchors," - fact families - different way to teach math facts/fluency	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 11:47 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
10.	I will use the different models and templates.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 7:11 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
11.	Yes- bringing student work and examples to the table. I would like to dig deeper into our weeknessess as a grade level and look for solutions for our team within.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:44 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
12.	none	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:43 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
13.	Not yet, but I will in my next Math PLC.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:37 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>

**Figure 5 (Continued)**

## Central Elementary PLC Survey Results: Question 5

14.	the websites	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 6:13 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
15.	NOt so much a skill but rather the attitude. As a new teacher I often thought I was the only one facing certain challenges but through learning communities I have learned that I am not alone and that helps boost my confidence and morale.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
16.	I have used more summative assessments	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:56 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
17.	opened culture awareness, use of manipulatives more.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:41 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
18.	when reading about how to improve african american scores i was able to apply that to my students as well	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:27 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
19.	i don't know	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 5:19 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
20.	Yes, I've learned to look at the bigger picture down the road to gain the main goal and break it down into smaller bites.	Tue, Nov 30, 2010 4:14 AM	<a href="#">Find...</a>
21.	I have used the website and resources found on <a href="http://sites.google.com/site/anchortechnologytomorrow/home/50-ways-to-anchor-technology">http://sites.google.com/site/anchortechnologytomorrow/home/50-ways-to-anchor-technology</a> for many class activities. I have also learned how to use the SmartBoard and other technologies that we have on our campus.	Mon, Nov 29, 2010 7:26 PM	<a href="#">Find...</a>

25 responses per page ▾

The results of the survey were shared with the entire staff through email and oral presentation during a Campus Instructional Leadership Team (CILT) meeting. The CILT members shared the results with their grade level and PLCs. After reviewing the results of the survey, the CILT members and principal were surprised that only 21 out of 38 staff members participated in the survey. We had initially introduced the request to complete the survey through email and orally presented it at a faculty meeting. During the duration of the survey window, we made morning and afternoon announcements reminding the staff to complete the survey. We were surprised that only 55% of the staff members completed the survey. The lack



of participation added to our conclusion that our campus was in need of PLC improvement, staff motivation, and change in climate.

As our campus continued the activities in our Action Inquiry, as shown in Table 1, we saw improvement in the structure of our PLCs. PLCs became more focused and organized once group norms and procedures were in place, but we still struggled with active participation from some PLC participants. Our improvement seemed to hit a roadblock with the same people presenting, sharing, modeling, and actively attending PLCs. It seemed several staff members did not have a shared vision for improvement. “Remember, having a shared vision is foundational before genuine school improvement can occur” (Combs, 2010, p. 4).

After completing the Nominal Group Survey and evaluating our 2011 TAKS results, our data showed that teachers who actively participated in the strategies shared during the PLCs had higher TAKS results than those who did not participate. Data showed that student achievement was positively affected by their teacher’s involvement in PLCs. The Nominal Group Survey at the end of our Action Inquiry also showed our campus had made PLCs more effective and relevant, but we still needed to work on other measures that would make PLCs more beneficial to educators and students.

### Discussion

During our Action Inquiry, several participants read and discussed BJ Gallagher's book *Yes Lives in the Land of No: A Tale of Triumph Over Negativity*. At the beginning of this Action Inquiry, I felt like the narrator in this book. I felt like I was venturing into the Land of No in search of Yes. I learned by watching others and I embraced the enthusiasm of those who shared my vision to improve our campus PLCs. Even though I was passionate about my cause, I feel that I did not effectively deal with some of the obstacles that I faced during this inquiry. Much like the characters of this book, I became disillusioned by the continued resistance of some staff members. In future Action Inquiries, I will continue to research ways that will make PLCs more beneficial to educators and students. I want to persevere despite the "No" responses and succeed in finding the elusive "Yes".

### References

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